

Yesterday in Mekeel's:

# The First U.S. Postage Stamp

by Elliott Perry (*From Mekeel's Weekly, September 14, 1918, with images added*)

There is only one type of the United States City Despatch Post stamp. It is beautifully engraved on steel and closely copies the stamp of the City Despatch Post but the inscription in the oval band surrounding the portrait of Washington reads "United States City Despatch Post" and the ornament at either end of "Three Cents" is smaller and differently shaped.

Apparently it was printed on colored paper in order to distinguish it from Greig's stamp, and whatever paper happened to be at hand was used, for the paper varies widely both in texture and in color. The



Left, Sc. 40L1, Greig's City Despatch Post first stamp, issued Feb. 1, 1842; right, Sc. 6LB3, "the First U.S. Postage Stamp", same design as Greig's, but with "United States" added, different ornaments, and on a shade of rose paper, issued Sept. 1, 1842

wove paper preceded that on which the printed surface is glazed and both varieties occur in shades and hues of green and blue.

Almost nothing is known about the pink, (rosy-buff), paper. No used copy on this paper has been found and all known specimens are believed to have come from a small block of ten or perhaps twenty which came into the possession of J. W. Scott in the early '70s and was divided into single copies by him.

There is a possibility this paper was intended to designate official use. It is of the same quality as the blue and green wove. Both Luff and Needham give August 1, 1843 as the date when the United States City Despatch Post commenced operation and these authorities, with others, state that Greig's stamp was used as a United States carrier's stamp for a short time prior to the issue of the government stamp. The local post stamp when cancelled with the government cancellations is listed as No. 844 [now Sc. 6LB1] in the standard catalog at the head of the New York carrier stamps, but its standing as a United States carrier stamp must depend largely upon the date when the United States Despatch Post commenced operation. The reports quoted above show conclusively that the plan was to commence operation August 1st and that owing to some cause there was a delay of fifteen days.

What was the cause of this delay? The present writer believes Rawdon, Wright & Hatch did not have the stamps ready by August 1st and that this was the principle cause of the delay. Neither Postmaster Graham nor anyone else in the Post Office at that time would be likely to have known much about the time required to engrave and print adhesive stamps and it would appear that the order to prepare the stamps was not given until about July 21, or after that date.

Graham's letter of July 21 reads as though he had not then



The U.S. City Despatch Post, New York N.Y., 3¢ black on light blue unsurfaced paper, Sc. 6LB3. Because 6LB2 is considered to have never been used and may have been an essay, this cover is regarded as the earliest documented usage of this 1842-45 issue. It was cancelled by an orange-red "U.S." in frame cancel and tied by a matching "U.S. City Despatch Post Sep. 1, 1 O'Clock" double-line circular datestamp.

ordered the stamps and was awaiting authority to do so. The order authorizing him to go ahead is dated August 1st and even if he anticipated the receipt of this order, the stamps could hardly have been ready much before August 16th.

All other arrangements necessary to change the City Despatch Post into a government carrier service were matters that could be adjusted quickly and without much trouble and it is quite evident Postmaster Graham expected the stamps could be prepared about as quickly as any ordinary printing job. He says, "—all the boxes, the stamps, etc., already in possession of Mr. Greig, can be used, by simply adding the words 'United States' to the stamps and to the labels on the boxes." Doubtless he was surprised when he learned that to add the words "United States" to the stamps would necessitate making a new plate.

If, however, the claim that Greig's stamp was used provisionally by the government is true, why didn't they start on August 1st as had been planned? In the present writer's opinion the only stamps of the City Despatch Post ever used by any department of the United States Post Office were the few—perhaps only one sheet—surcharged "United States" in manuscript. Even in the few instances when the unsurcharged City Despatch Post stamps were recognized by the New York Post Office and franked letters through the despatch department of that office, they were not United States carrier stamps.

Admitting this opinion to be based chiefly on theory, the writer believes it to coincide more closely with the facts than any other supposition. Let us review the situation in August 1842:— In the six months of its operation Greig's City Despatch Post had been extensively advertised and in July was handling over 400 letters per day. Undoubtedly every effort had been made to increase the business and to sell as many stamps as possible. Greig himself

was a most honorable gentleman and, knowing that his stamps had been purchased by his customers in good faith, was morally bound either to redeem those outstanding when his post was sold to the Government, or to recognize them.

Probably he called in and redeemed most of them. Those which were not turned in and redeemed he recognized as an individual, but not officially as an employee of the United States Post Office. There is not a shred of evidence that the Post Office Department received any payment for outstanding City Despatch Post stamps and these stamps therefore had no franking power and in no sense were they a claim against the Post Office. Letters bearing them were delivered because Greig made good the postage they represented.

Whenever a letter bearing one of his stamps was found in the mail Greig paid the post office three cents in cash or made an entry on the accounts of the despatch department, and the letter was postmarked and the stamp cancelled with the regular government handstamps, delivery being made just as if a United States stamp had been used.

This theory accounts perfectly for the copy Luff mentions which is cancelled "Feb 15"—(presumably 1843)—and for all other known copies except the specimen formerly in the Deats collection, which has the words "United States" written across the top in red-violet ink. Of the surcharged copy Luff states, "The letter to which this is attached is dated August 14, 1842. The cancellation is apparently 'Aug 19th' but examination shows the '9' to be an inverted '6'. [See cover to the right.] Nothing is known of the history of this surcharge but its intention is apparent."

This surcharge is indeed most interesting, but of itself it does not prove, or even indicate, provisional use of Greig's stamp as a government carrier. What more natural than that the clerk who cancelled the stamps and postmarked the letters, working under Greig's supervision, should write United States on the stamp to ensure the regular delivery of the letter? If Greig's stamp had franking power without the words "United States" why bother to surcharge it?

But the most interesting and indeed the vital point about this copy is not the stamp itself. The proof that it was actually sold and used as a United States carrier is that other stamps on the sheet from which it came—and probably the whole sheet)—also had the same manuscript surcharge. The stamp shows the top of the adjoining specimen below it on the sheet and this copy also was surcharged "United States," for the tops of the letters appear. There is no logical explanation for two of these stamps from the same sheet bearing the same surcharge except that the stamps were surcharged on the sheet and it follows that they were surcharged before being sold and therefore were United States carrier stamps.

August 14, 1842, fell on a Sunday. The surcharged stamp may have been sold on the 14th in anticipation of the commencement of the government carrier service on the 16th, or it may not have been sold until the 16th. That it was not cancelled on the 15th tends to show it was not purchased before the 16th and also that the United States City Despatch Post stamps were not ready until the 16th. Surcharged stamps would not be issued after the United States City Despatch Post stamps were available. As long as Greig was connected with the despatch department letters bearing his stamps were collected and delivered; not, however, because of any claim the purchasers of his stamps had against the United States Post Office, but because every purchaser had a claim against Greig, and because the carriers and other employees were acting under Greig's instruc-

tions and he was accounting to the Post Office for his stamps.

A possibility exists that Postmaster Graham's arrangement with Greig included recognition of his stamps outstanding when the post was taken over but this is doubtful and even if it were a fact it would not make them United States stamps. Every current English, French or other foreign postage stamp, issued by a country belonging to the Universal Postal Union, has franking power within the United States under certain conditions, in normal times. If on a letter coming from England, an English stamp will carry a letter from New York to Chicago just as well as any United States stamp, but because this franking power is recognized by the United States Post Office we do not consider an English stamp so used thereby to become a United States stamp. In the writer's opinion none of the unsurcharged City Despatch Post stamps were ever sold by the United States Post Office.

Regarding the United States City Despatch Post stamps stated by Luff and others to have been used before August 16th, 1842, perhaps the saying, "one swallow doesn't make a summer", is applicable. Luff mentions one copy bearing the date August 5th, 1842. Few collectors would accept the evidence of a single copy against the official statements of Graham, Greig and Seymour, who were the persons in control of and most closely in touch with the post and the stamps, particularly when their statements are dated within such a short time after the post was established. The date and first sentence of [the reports quoted above] should satisfy anyone that the date of issue of the first United States postage stamp was August 16, 1842.



*It is now generally accepted that determining characteristic of usages of Greig's stamp, Sc. 40L1, as a United States City Despatch stamp, Sc. 6LB1, is the boxed "U.S." in red, shown on this off cover single to the right. The cover above bears a 6LB1 stamp and an August 16, 1842 c.d.s., marking it as a usage on the first day of the U.S. City Despatch Post service. Some regard this, therefore, as a First Day Cover for the first U.S. Postage stamp.*



*Note as well the inverted "9" used as a "6" in the cancellation date, enlarged and computer enhanced here. This is as described in the text above, quoting from Luff.*

